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ABSTRACT

Although, as an important component of any basic skills curriculum, college remedial reading programs need to be objectively and fully evaluated, no comprehensive, systematic procedures have been developed for this purpose. Three guidelines should be followed in evaluating college remedial reading programs: first, appropriate variables that allow for maximum input must be selected; second, the evaluation must cover not only the performance of the students in the program but the entire program itself; and, finally, the end result of the evaluation must be program improvement. Since no complete evaluation model has been developed to aid college remedial reading program directors, directors must rely on the few evaluation models that have been proposed. Until meaningful systematic evaluations of college remedial reading programs can be carried out, the success of such programs and their various methodologies--in short, the need for such programs--will be seriously questioned. (The paper includes an outline of one model for program evaluation and a bibliography of relevant readings.) (GW)

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NEEDED: SYSTEMATIC EVALUATION OF COLLEGE REMEDIAL READING PROGRAMS

Presented to

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University of Notre Dame

by

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NEEDED: SYSTEMATIC EVALUATION

OF COLLEGE REMEDIAL READING PROGRAMS*

Are college remedial reading (CRR) programs failing to help under-prepared high-risk students? Would these students do just as well without participating in such remedial programs?

With the influx of high-risk students into institutions of higher education, greater demands have been placed on the college basic skills programs "to be more accountable than traditional education programs" (Grant and Hoeber, 1978, p. 34). Basic skills program directors, however, have often been reluctant to conduct objective or detailed evaluations to determine the effects of a program, since a negative result may mean the elimination of such programs. Indeed, "there is strong evidence that many college administrators and state legislators look at evaluation as a means to legitimate the curtailment of such programs" (Bynum et al, 1972, p. 82). As a result of these problems, few evaluations are published; even these are often "limited in quantity and scope" (Bynum, p. 120) and do not address the issue of program modification, since change is seen as a threat to program continuation. Even those directors who may wish to evaluate their programs objectively cannot find an adequate evaluation model. Consequently, every basic skills program that is evaluated uses different--and often, inadequate--measures of effectiveness.

College remedial reading programs especially, as an important component of any basic skills curriculum, need to be objectively and

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fully evaluated. As Chaplin (1977) notes, during the 1960's such reading programs "were hurriedly instituted with little foresight and planning for their stability. They were simply insurance policies that protected the cherished high standards of academic excellence" (p. 3). Consequently, little has been done to bring about their evaluation in a systematic or realistic way. Further, of the existing evaluations, only a few have been published (Roueche and Kirk, 1973) or made available for study in the ERIC system (Losak, 1971; Schiavone, 1977).

College reading educators have wrestled with the issue of evaluation for the past twenty-five years. Eller (1956) and Colvin (1962) each called for the evaluation of college reading programs but did not specify any procedures for such evaluations. Summerfeld (1955), however, did propose five general steps for conducting evaluations of college reading programs. Nonetheless, he, as well as other educators of that time, based his evaluation procedures on a research model, in contrast to the current evaluation model.

Traditionally, the most common method of evaluating the effectiveness of college remedial reading programs has been based on the testing of one variable, usually the improved academic achievement or reading scores of program participants. However, as Guba (1972) states, "the use of laboratory research designs and techniques poses conditions that are simply inappropriate for the purposes for which one does an evaluation" (p. 257-258). First, such research studies rely upon randomly-selected experimental and control groups to produce

statistically valid results. However, control groups and random selection are inconsistent with the philosophies of CRR programs and the needs of participating high-risk students. Second, a research study cannot reflect the effects of an entire program by the use of one or two variables, merely a controled portion of it. On the other hand, evaluations are done by setting up "conditions of invited interference from all factors that might ever influence a learning...transaction" (Guba, p. 257). The goal is less, not more, control. Finally, research is rarely undertaken to produce change, merely to "search for new knowledge regardless of [its] value" (Suchman, 1967, p. 75). Evaluation assumes, necessarily, the need for change.

There are no solutions currently to the problems of evaluating CRR programs for high-risk students. However, my research in the field has indicated that three guidelines are necessary in conducting any such evaluation. First, appropriate variables which allow for maximum input must be selected. Second, the evaluation must cover not only the performance of the students in the program, but the entire program itself. Finally, the end result of the evaluation must be program improvement.

First, one must select comprehensive variables in conducting an evaluation of CRR programs. However, there is little in the existing literature to guide the CRR program evaluator. Maxwell (1971) proposed four variables in evaluating CRR programs: GPA, the limited use of standardized reading tests, local objectives, and attitude changes. Drexler

and Pepper (1972) clearly favored the use of academic achievement but conceded that attrition, persistence, or "the work a student engages in after graduation" might also be used as measures of program effectiveness (p. 190). Emond (1976) suggested four longitudinal measures: persistence, semester-by-semester GPA, number of failures and course withdrawals, and attitude changes. Emond felt that persistence especially "has been overlooked as a major indicator of program success" (p. 23). Predgier (1965) wrote that persistence should receive more attention as a criterion for success, for "ultimately, the student's success in college is judged not in terms of his GPA, but, rather, in terms of the educational program which he has completed" (p. 62). Whether any or all of these variables are appropriate for programs involving high-risk students, or whether all of the necessary variables have been identified, one cannot say.

Second, one must evaluate the entire program. In the past, program evaluation has too often been confused with student evaluation (Bynum). Although one can evaluate certain aspects of a program by evaluating the students and their performance, problems can result from such an emphasis. If the student does not succeed in the program, oftentimes "the student is viewed as the failure rather than the program" (Grant and Hoeber, p. 31). Moreover, little attention is paid to the processes or methods of the program itself. For example, Schiavone (1977) judged the effectiveness of a remedial reading program at Manhattan Community College by studying the student pass-rate for the program over six consecutive semesters. Schiavone found that the pass-rate declined thirteen percent over the six semesters from 68 to 55

percent. Although one could take issue with the standard set for passing the course (which was the attainment of the 12th grade reading level as measured by a raw score of 50 on the Stanford Test of Academic Skills [TASK]), the main problem is that the evaluation implied that the students, not the program, have failed. Schiavone recommended the expansion of the course into a "sequence of levels"(p. 34); in short, a lengthening of the current program. By focusing on the students and their declining performance, Schiavone ignored any implications of program failure. Deciding why the pass-rate declined 13 percent in six semesters would have been the first step in a program-centered evaluation.

Finally, one must aim for the improvement of the program not the maintenance of the status quo in conducting CRR program evaluations. Two questions should be answered: what aspects of the program are not working as well as they could be? Then, what changes can be made so that the program can effectively meet more of its objectives? While this point may seem obvious, this has oftentimes not been the case in existing evaluations. As example of this problem surfaces in a study by Losak (1971), in which a random sample of freshmen students at the Miami-Dade Junior College who scored low on a placement test were enrolled in a regular freshman English course rather than the remedial program. The experimental group received instruction in remedial reading-writing, while the control group received instruction in the regular freshman English course. Losak found that the current remedial program was no more effective for the remedial students than the English course was for the students in the control group. More importantly, he

concluded that there was a need to identify those who could and could not benefit from a standard remedial program; those who could not benefit (i.e., those who failed) should be enrolled in more "relevant programs [that were] developed for them" (p. 13). In other words, he suggested that the students be tailored to the program. If the program does not succeed, one must find the students who will make it succeed rather than change the program.

What is needed now is the framework of a complete evaluation model to aid CRR program directors. Because none have been suggested, one must rely on the few models proposed for basic skills programs.

Bynum (1972), for example, in a comprehensive study of 711 college compensatory programs, presented a sample evaluation from one anonymous state university in New York. This evaluation reported student performance data as well as "the relative impact of specific practices and the contribution of specific courses" (p. 81). However, the evaluation procedure is not presented in enough detail to warrant its use as a model. Grant and Hoeber (1978) suggested two models for the evaluation of basic skills programs. One, designed by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, "proposed a three part evaluation method" (p. 36). While this model may prove useful when it is disseminated, it is currently unavailable from a publisher or from the ERIC system, and not readily available from FIPSE. The second model alluded to by Grant and Hoeber was proposed by Suchman (1967) to be used in evaluating public service and social action programs (Tables 1 & 2). In following the model, one would first establish long-range, intermediate,

and immediate objectives, as well as the assumptions implicit in the objectives. Then one would evaluate the program in terms of the objectives by using a five category evaluation procedure. What is interesting about Suchman's model is that it employs both evaluative and research designs within its five categories. Furthermore, the categories (Effort, Performance, Adequacy of Performance, Efficiency, and Process) are arranged hierarchically from the least to the most difficult to accomplish. Such a framework may prove useful for the evaluation of CRR programs.

Until more meaningful systematic evaluations of CRR programs can be carried out, the success of such programs and their various methodologies--in short, the need for such programs--will be seriously questioned. Further explorations to find appropriate comprehensive and systematic evaluation models for CRR programs must be conducted, perhaps experimenting with Suchman's model, and the results published or stored in the ERIC system. Without such information, the worth, as well as the future, of such programs is in doubt.

TABLE 1

Suchman's Model of Program Evaluation*

I. Set Objectives
(long-range, intermediate, immediate)

II. Determine Underlying Assumptions

III. Carry Out Evaluation Using Five Categories

	A Effort	B Performance	C Adequacy of Performance	D Efficiency	E Process
Type of Criterion	Evaluative	Evaluative	Administrative	Administrative	Research
Related Question	How much effort was expended?	How much was accomplished?	How sufficient were these accomplishments?	Could the same accomplishments have been produced more efficiently?	What are the successful and unsuccessful components of the program?
Evaluative Goals	amount of activity	accomplishments in terms of objectives	accomplishments in terms of total need	need for alternate methods in terms of cost, time, personnel	identification of successful and unsuccessful aspects
Evaluative Problems	No judgment of effort	poorly-stated or missing objectives	unrealistic expectations; subjective judgment	subjective basis for judgment	unreliable and invalid measures
Possible application for individualized reading program in laboratory setting	Hours of operation; # faculty, students, classes; # units of faculty material produced; # work assignments finished daily, weekly, hourly.	# students meeting objectives; # competencies met; # students passing, etc.	Attendance ratios; drop ratios; proportion of population in program vs. total diagnosed population.	Are students who need the program being identified during diagnosis? Would a different approach produce the same results?	SEE REVERSE SIDE

*Adapted from Evaluative Research: Principles and Practice in Public Service and Social Action Programs, by Edward A. Suchman. New York: Russell Sage Fdn., 1967.

TABLE 2

Subcategories of the Process Category:
One of Suchman's Five Categories of Evaluation *

Subcategories of Process	Possible Application for Individualized Reading Program in Laboratory Setting
A. Attributes of the program that make it successful or unsuccessful	Individualization? Competency-based? Whole-class approach? Interpersonal contact? Relevant Material?
B. Recipients of the program who are affected; successful and unsuccessful recipients	Students classified by their progress toward objectives (SES, age, race, no. of semesters in attendance, etc.)
C. Conditions under which the program is successful	varying class sizes? mechanical vs. nonmechanical devices? lab vs. class?
D. Effects produced by the program (single/multiple; intentional/unintentional; duration):	
1. Cognitive Effects	measured by GPA, reading scores, etc.
2. Attitudinal Effects	measured by self-concept and attitude instruments, etc.
3. Behavioral Effects	measured by attrition, persistence, etc.

*Adapted from Evaluative Research: Principles and Practice in Public Service and Social Action Programs by Edward A Suchman. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1967.

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